US-China competition offers opportunity for Caribbean states to strengthen security capacity

The United States has long played a key role in its ‘third border' in the Caribbean, but is increasingly facing competition from China, particularly following a reduction in security aid provided by the US. Xander J Causwell analyses the impact of this reduction on regional security

Key Points
- Although the US is a key contributor to Caribbean regional security, its security assistance has declined between 2009 and 2018 despite numerous security agreements being put in place during that time.
- China has increasingly attempted to fill the void left by the reduction in aid through military and security assistance, and foreign direct investment in Caribbean Community (CARICOM) states.
- The emergence of China in the region has led to US efforts to reverse the decline in security aid, giving the CARICOM states the opportunity to strengthen their capacity in security affairs.

The governments of Jamaica and the United States on 23 October 2019 signed a new memorandum of understanding (MoU) that altered the terms of their security co-operation arrangement. The MoU specifically concerns intelligence and the interception of communications of Jamaican residents. The pre-existing bilateral agreement enabled US and local law enforcement to intercept the telecommunications of Jamaican residents in a concerted effort to tackle organised crime, known as Operation Anthem. Jamaica’s Supreme Court ruled that agreement as unconstitutional in 2018, necessitating the renegotiating of the bilateral security relationship.

These developments placed the status of US-Jamaica security co-operation under public scrutiny. Days after the new MoU was signed, Jamaica’s Sunday Gleaner newspaper published an editorial on 30 October 2019 alleging that Jamaica had ceased co-operating under the previous agreement in 2016, citing an anonymous source in the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) who added that the pre-2016 bilateral arrangement proved vital in dismantling criminal groups using telecommunications to conduct fraudulent activities internationally. In an apparent response to the editorial, recently arrived US Ambassador to Jamaica Donald Tapia issued a statement via Twitter on 30 October reaffirming the US commitment to a strong bilateral security co-operation arrangement with Jamaica, and to supporting the latter’s leadership role in the Caribbean.

Jamaica does indeed lead the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) bloc of countries in its state capacity for security, maintaining the largest military among them at approximately 6,000
personnel, according to Jane’s. Of the remaining states, Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Guyana, Montserrat, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago maintain standing militaries of varying sizes, whereas Dominica, Grenada, Haiti, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines maintain only police forces as of December 2019. Region-wide, the security forces are tasked with combatting transnational criminal trafficking groups as well as providing emergency responses to natural disasters.

Jamaican Prime Minister Andrew Holness (C) and Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang inspect a Chinese honour guard during a welcome ceremony at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on 8 November 2019. (Nicolas Asfouri/AFP via Getty Images)

However, these small developing states remain heavily reliant on North American and European support for their respective security forces. Having no native defence industry among them, the territories rely on foreign arms transfers. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) database on arms transfers indicates that the frequency of US arms transfers to CARICOM states far exceeds that of any other countries from 1950 to 2018, with the United Kingdom being the next most popular source. Until 2018, the bloc also had virtually no capacity to sustain professional military courses, and relied on course offerings in North America and Europe to maintain a world standard level of training.
The US has been CARICOM’s most reliable benefactor regarding security assistance. By virtue of being relatively stable liberal democracies in the wider Latin America and Caribbean super-region, the US considers them strategic partners in its adversarial relationship with neighbouring states such as Cuba and Venezuela. Moreover, the Caribbean is often called the US’s ‘third border’, as criminal trafficking among the island states often spills over into the US homeland. Limited state capacity in the region also makes it vulnerable to exploitation by militant groups that may seek to attack US interests. For example, 17 individuals allegedly connected to Hizbullah were arrested in the Caribbean territory of Curacao in 2009 for engaging in smuggling operations in aid of the militant organisation, according to a 29 April 2009 Guardian report. Unsurprisingly, the US government subsequently ramped up security assistance to the Caribbean under the Bush administration. US security assistance to CARICOM for the year 2000 was valued at USD33.7 million, according to Security Assistance Monitor data. That figure rose steadily to a peak of USD203.1 million in 2009.

During that year, the US administration of Barack Obama initiated the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI), the stated objective of which was to focus US security assistance on five key areas: maritime and aerial security co-operation, law enforcement capacity building, border/port security and firearms interdiction, justice sector reform, and crime prevention and at-risk youth. Rhetorically, the initiative appeared to reaffirm the US’s commitment to augmenting the Caribbean state capacity in security affairs. In actuality, the CBSI coincided with a precipitous decline in the annual value of US security assistance to CARICOM: the Security Assistance Monitor data records a total value of USD195 million for 2011, which fell to USD52.7 million the following year. The total annual value declined almost gradually to USD20 million in 2018.

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